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The Appropriacy of Group Activities: Views from Some Southeast Asian Second Language Educators

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ABSTRACT

Group activities developed in Western countries have been advocated for use in foreign and second language learning internationally. This article reports the views of 31 second language educators from six Southeast Asian countries (Brunei Darussalam, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, and Thailand) on the appropriateness of group activities in their own educational contexts. Background is provided on the six countries and relevant previous scholarship is reviewed.

Data were collected via questionnaires and interviews. Some of the participants also took part in the data analysis. Results showed that these Southeast Asian second language educators feel group activities are appropriate to their contexts and that they are already

making use of groups in their teaching. Key problems cited in using groups were low motivation, significant variation in proficiency levels, and large classes. These problems are discussed. The recommendation is made that the literatures on cooperative learning and task-based language teaching may provide insights into methods of increasing the effectiveness of group activities, while at the same time, educators will want to use their own local knowledge to adapt group methods to fit their particular contexts.

INTRODUCTION

Whenever a teaching methodology is exported from one part of the world to another, educators, parents, students, and other stakeholders on the receiving end of this "gift" are, with good reason, cautious about its appropriateness to their particular situation. Cultures, students' needs, and educational resources are just a few of the ways in which countries differ. In the specific case of foreign and second language learning (hereafter the term "second language" will be used for both foreign and second languages), other factors are also important.

The present study investigated the perceived appropriacy of group activities, a set of methods which are increasingly popular in North America and elsewhere in the West, for the teaching of second languages in six Southeast Asian countries. Group activities are defined as those in which between two and six students are assigned to work together. The six countries are Brunei Darussalam, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines,

Singapore, and Thailand. Background on these countries is provided in a later section.

Interest in groups has also grown recently in second language education as part of an overall trend toward communicative methodology. Research into the effects of interaction on second language acquisition is often cited in support of group activities (e.g., Long, 1990). Many instructional materials now feature group activities (e.g., Nunan, 1995). Similarly, materials written for teacher education recommend that groups be an important part of teachers' methodological repertoire (e.g., Doff, 1988).

BACKGROUND

The Countries Involved in the Study

The six countries in which participants in the study work vary greatly among each other in terms of geographic size, population, religion, economic performance, and languages. These variables are described in Table 1.

Table 1

Background Data on the Six Countries

Country	Brunei	Indonesia	Malaysia	Philippines	Singapore	Thailand
Size (sq.km.)	5,765	1,904,569	329,758	300,000	639	513,115
Population (thousands)	260	180,000	18,500	64,000	2,900	55,000
Majority religion	Islam	Islam	Islam	Christianity	Buddhism/ Taoism	Buddhism
Other major religions	Buddhism Taoism	Christianity	Buddhism Taoism Hinduism	Islam	Christianity Hinduism Islam	Islam
Per capita GNP (US$)	17,500	645	2,965	835	15,200	1,660
Major language	Malay	Bahasa Indonesia	Malay	Tagalog	English	Thai
Major second language(s)[1] taught in school	English	English	English	English	Malay Mandarin Tamil	English

Sources: Asiaweek (Catch the spirit, 1993); Europa World Yearbook (Europa Publications, 1993)

[1] In all the countries except Thailand, the major language is a second language for a significant number of people.

The Role of Culture

In examining culture's role in the appropriacy of group activities in Southeast Asian second language classrooms, Hofstede's (1980; 1986) four dimensions of cross-cultural difference may be useful: individualism, power distance, uncertainty avoidance, and masculinity. Below, each of these is described and its relation to the appropriacy of group activities for language teaching is postulated.

Hofstede's first dimension, individualism, concerns the way that people interact with one another. Societies high in individualism are inclined to be loosely integrated, as people look out for their individual interests. Conversely, low

individualism societies are more tightly integrated, as people hold a more collectivist outlook. Students from high individualism societies may feel reluctant to share with one another and may prefer to work alone. Also, they might be more willing to speak up in whole class settings, thus making groups less necessary as a means of encouraging students to speak in class. On the other hand, language learners from low individualism societies may be more inclined to help one another. They would also be more likely to speak in small groups than in whole class settings. Thus, group activities would seem to fit well with low individualism societies.

Hofstede's second dimension, power distance, can be defined as the extent of inequality of power and influence between people at different points in societal hierarchies. Hofstede found a high power distance associated with such beliefs as subordinates preferring close supervision, conformity being highly valued, and employees being reluctant to trust one another. It might be hypothesized that in high power distance cultures classroom group activities might be received unfavourably because teachers are seen as the prime, infallible source of knowledge. The concepts of learning from other students and of students taking the initiative for their own learning might not fit well in such cultures. On the other hand, in small power distance cultures, learners might be more ready to see themselves as having valuable knowledge to share with one another and being capable of taking initiative and learning together. Therefore, small power distance societies

would seem more likely to support group activities.

The third dimension, uncertainty avoidance, is the extent to which members of a culture feel comfortable with ambiguity and divergence from the norm. In cultures strong in uncertainty avoidance, students might prefer to learn directly from the teacher all the time, rather than discussing (and perhaps disagreeing) with one another and then waiting to see if what their group has worked out meets the teacher's approval. Also, strong uncertainty avoidance might incline people against instructional innovations, such as group activities. On the other hand, in weak uncertainty avoidance cultures, learners might be more willing to engage in discussion and debate with peers and delay hearing from the teacher. People might also be more willing to try new instructional methods.

Masculinity, perhaps unfortunately, is the label Hofstede gives the fourth dimension. This involves materialism, assertiveness, and self-centeredness, which Hofstede classifies as masculine, versus quality of life, interdependence, and service to others, which Hofstede labels as feminine. The hypothesis here would be that in masculine cultures, students may be prone to dislike working in groups because a group ethic would run counter to the ideal of self-assertiveness for personal gain. In contrast, feminine cultures seem largely well-suited to group activities which place value on social solidarity, stress depending on one another, and emphasize that what helps one helps all.

How do the cultures in this study fall regarding these four dimensions? While there is a great deal of variety among the individual cultures, perhaps the stereotypical view (also generally supported by Hofstede's research) would be that Southeast Asian cultures are high along the power distance and uncertainty avoidance dimensions and low along the individualism and masculinity dimensions. Western cultures, where most of the research and development on group activities have been done, would, according to the stereotypes, be their mirror opposites in terms of Hofstede's dimensions. Thus, according to the stereotypes, both Southeast Asian and Western cultures appear to have traits which both support and oppose the use of groups.

The Specific Case of Second Language Learning

With specific regard to the use of group activities with second language students in the Southeast Asia region, Rodgers (1988) describes four arguments against their use (see Prabhu [1987] for a related discussion). He terms these: Muddled Modelling, Faulty Feedback, Chaotic Classrooms, and Native Noise. Below, each objection is explained and Rodgers' and other educators' counterarguments presented.

Concern about Muddled Modelling is the worry that when groups of students are listening to each other or reading each others' writing, they are being provided poor models of the target language. This, it is feared, will lead to fossilization of non-target forms. In contrast, in a teacher-fronted classroom, the teacher does most of the talking, and

when individual students are called on, the teacher is right there to correct any non-target-like language.

Rodgers counters the concern about Muddled Modelling by noting that, given the shift in second language pedagogy toward a more communicative approach, there is now more of an emphasis on encouraging students to use the language, the variety of language functions produced, and negotiation of meaning, and less of an emphasis on accuracy. Further, he cites Porter's 1983 study which found that students did not produce more errors while speaking in groups, nor did they seem to learn erroneous language from groupmates.

People who oppose group activities for second language instruction on the grounds of Faulty Feedback worry that peers will be unable to point out each others' errors. Even worse, peers may furnish each other with inaccurate correction. On the other hand, in a teacher-fronted classroom, students can be more sure of obtaining reliable feedback on their language. Rodgers believes that a similar rebuttal can be made to this objection as was made on Muddled Modelling. If students are discussing a language point with one another in the target language in the context of providing feedback, that in itself is a valuable language learning experience. Further, Rodgers cites Bruton and Samuda (1980) in a speaking class, and Jacobs (1989), in a writing class, who found few instances of miscorrection by peers.

Fear of Chaotic Classes is the worry that students will abuse the greater freedom which group activities give them and

become difficult for the teacher to control. In response to this concern, Rodgers suggests that with sufficient training and experience, teachers can master the classroom management skills necessary to carry out group activities. Jacobs and Hall (1994) give specific suggestions for alternative ways of reducing the noise level, e.g., urging students to sit close together, having a Quiet Captain in each group (perhaps the noisiest student) in charge of maintaining the proper sound level, and suggesting that students use 15 centimetre voices, i.e., voices that can be heard from no more than a short distance away.

Native Noise, the fourth argument against groups for second language instruction, involves the concern that without the teacher there to supervise, students will use the L1 (first language) in their groups. In answer to this objection, Rodgers cites Deen (1987) who suggests that students may revert to the L1 out of frustration. Thus, tasks need to be carefully designed so that students have the L2 resources to accomplish them. Rodgers also recommends that perhaps code-switching should be tolerated or even encouraged in Southeast Asia, as it seems to be the norm among the many multilingual people of the region.

DATA SOURCES, COLLECTION, AND ANALYSIS

Participants

Participants in the study were 31 educators from Brunei Darussalam, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore,

and Thailand enroled in one of two courses at the Southeast Asian Ministers of Education Organization Regional Language Centre (SEAMEO RELC) in Singapore. Language educators from Southeast Asia and beyond attend three-week to fifteen-month courses there on Applied Linguistics and related fields. Most course members came to RELC based on nominations by the Ministries of Education of their countries.

Methods of Data Collection

The first author was teaching a class at RELC on Research Methods, and the second author was a member of a course. The class discussed Burnaby and Sun's (1989) study in which, via questionnaires and interviews, the views of language educators in China were solicited on the appropriacy of communicative language teaching, a Western export, for the teaching of ESL in China. The class then discussed how a similar study could be done about cooperative learning in Southeast Asia. As a result, a questionnaire was constructed.

The class decided to make participation in the study voluntary and to give people the option of whether they wanted to write their name on the questionnaire. This was done in hopes of making people feel more at ease. A second decision was to use the more general term "group activities" rather than "cooperative learning." This was done to avoid confusion because "cooperative learning" was a new term to many course members as well as a term with different definitions. Cooperative learning can be seen as a subset of group activities, with the distinction being that, rather than just

putting students in groups and asking them to work together, in cooperative learning teachers attempt to facilitate collaboration among students by such means as structuring activities to encourage group members to help one another learn and helping students develop the skills needed to work with others (Johnson, Johnson, & Holubec, 1993).

A third decision was to operationally define group activities as being appropriate if they would be beneficial to use as a regular and significant feature of classroom processes. The final version of the questionnaire was distributed to the 41 members of two RELC courses who were from Southeast Asian countries, and each item was briefly explained. Twenty-five questionnaires were returned.

Subsequently, the two researchers conducted semi-structured interviews with 12 course members, two each chosen at random from the six countries. The interviews were used to clarify and elaborate issues which had emerged from the questionnaires. The interviews also served as a check on the representativeness of the questionnaire data because interviewees were selected without knowledge of whether they had completed the questionnaire. The researchers were concerned that because completion of the questionnaire was voluntary, there was a possibility that only those with a particular outlook, e.g., who supported the use of groups, would respond. Nine of the interviewees were female and three were male. This roughly mirrored the female/male ratio among course participants. (The questions used to initiate discussion

in the interviews are shown in Appendix B.) Everyone who was requested to give an interview agreed to do so. The average time for the interviews was 35 minutes. Six interviewees reported they had not completed the questionnaire. Thus, there were 31 total participants in the study.

Responses to the open-ended questionnaire items were analyzed first, using the constant comparative method (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In this method, a sorting process is used to derive categories from the responses to questionnaires and interviews. Once a category system manifests itself, the responses in each category are analyzed, and the categories become the headings under which the results of the study are presented. As a further check on the validity of the data, several participants in the study joined the researchers in this data analysis process (Davis, 1992). As another check on the accuracy of the research, course members were asked to provide feedback on the first draft of this research report.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Data from the questionnaire and interviews, grouped into seven categories, are presented below.

Participants' Background and Experience with Groups

In terms of where participants taught, 16 were at the tertiary level, 11 at the secondary, and four at the primary. However, about half of the tertiary instructors had previous experience at other levels. Almost all respondents taught English, but many taught other subjects as well. Except for a primary school principal, all were teachers. All but three

reported receiving at least a little instruction in use of groups as part of preservice and/or inservice training.

Every participant except one reported using groups at least some of the time in their teaching, with most reporting using groups at least 20% of the time. The majority remembered few group activities when they were students. In general, they felt that the use of groups was on the rise. For instance, one Thai tertiary lecturer with 12 years experience described how the use of groups at her school began 10 years ago after an inservice workshop by the British Council. Another reported reason for the increased use of groups is that such activities are now part of the syllabus in many Southeast Asian countries.

Of the participants who used groups, all but one reported that they were generally successful in aiding learning. However, this secondary school teacher went on to state that when he had taught at another school, with a very different student population, he had used groups successfully.

Student Characteristics

Respondents felt certain student characteristics make groups more or less appropriate. One factor which makes groups less appropriate is lack of motivation to learn the target language. Actually, this is not really an argument against groups, because low student motivation makes any form of teaching more difficult. However, when groups are used instead of a teacher-fronted approach, lack of motivation becomes more obvious, since in a teacher-fronted mode students can often

just sit there passively listening to the teacher. The lesson will continue because the teacher is conscientiously performing their task. On the other hand, with group activities, if students do not participate, the lesson cannot continue. While this latter experience seems worse, in both cases, no learning is taking place among the unmotivated students.

Also important to keep in mind on the topic of motivation is the hope that group activities will, as many respondents noted and the research suggests (Slavin, 1990), lead to increased success for students and a better learning environment, and thus increase motivation. One important element in promoting this motivating success is, as one of the interviewees pointed out, that the difficulty level of the tasks which group members are set must be appropriate to learners' current levels of proficiency. If students' do not have the necessary preparation and language support to carry out a task they may soon feel frustrated and give up.

Motivation is related to proficiency, another variable which respondents judged to be significant. Lack of language proficiency was given as a reason why students could not function in groups or reverted to the L1 to accomplish group tasks. Low proficiency and, related to it, low self-confidence in second language use, also made students shy to speak in groups. One interviewee from the Philippines felt that in his class of 60+ with a teacher-fronted mode at least he could force shy students to speak once in a while, whereas in groups they might not say anything in the target language.

Student familiarity with groups is another factor which respondents mentioned, with many citing students' prior experience studying in groups as a positive factor. For example, a Malaysian noted that new students at his tertiary institution are exposed to group activities during the orientation week. On the other hand, if most of students' prior learning experiences involved studying on their own, sometimes in competition with classmates, this left them reluctant and ill-prepared for group activities.

Most respondents did not seem very worried about student use of their L1 when in groups. For instance, a Bruneian teacher felt that the use of the L1 was beneficial in cases where it helped students understand an important point. When she felt students were using the L1 too much, she was able to get them to switch to the L2 by being strict. A Thai respondent reported that she sometimes allows groups to speak Thai while working on a task but that their final product has to be in English.

Similarly, participants were not very concerned about Rodgers' Muddled Modelling and Faulty Feedback. In general, their view seemed to be that the benefits gained by students in terms of fluency outweighed the possible negative effect that peers' errors might have on accuracy. Further, it was pointed out that groupwork was not the only type of activity used in class. At other times, students obtained more target-like input and received feedback from the teacher.

Class Size

The number of students per class was seen as a key determinant of the appropriacy of group activities, with smaller classes seen as facilitating groups. In some Southeast Asian countries, classes of 50+, even 60+, are the norm. One of the problems of large classes is that if teachers break students into groups of four or less, as much of the literature on groups recommends, there are many groups to supervise. However, if teachers use groups larger than four, many of the benefits in terms of increased involvement are lost. Having a large class also raises the noise level. Additionally, respondents felt that large classes exacerbate the management problems involved in group activities, such as getting students into and out of groups.

Several reactions to this issue come to mind. First, as with lack of motivation, large classes make any form of instruction more difficult. Second, groups offer a partial solution to one of the main problems that large classes pose for language instruction, i.e., that in a teacher-fronted mode, each student gets very little chance to speak the target language. Along the same lines, Gan (1992:6), writing from the Malaysian perspective, notes that, "Students can provide individual attention and assistance to one another, something that a teacher teaching a typical class of forty pupils cannot hope to do no matter how enthusiastic and conscientious [s]he is." Third, teachers can learn strategies for using groups even in very large classes. For example, Nolasco and Arthur (1986) suggest that group activities be introduced gradually to

allow students to become accustomed to new routines and that very clear instructions be given and student comprehension of these instructions checked before a group activity begins and while it proceeds. (See Safnil, 1991, for further suggestions.)

Physical Setting

The physical setting in which instruction takes place was seen by participants as important in several ways. One, the usually higher sound level which groups generate is less of a problem for those participants whose classroom walls are thick and whose rooms are large. At the other extreme, some respondents reported that their classrooms have no walls or are so crowded that it is difficult to arrange students in groups. Another important aspect of the physical setting is the furniture in the classroom. While most respondents reported that their classrooms have moveable chairs and tables, a few reported that in their classrooms the chairs and desks cannot be moved, thus making it difficult for students to collaborate.

Administrators and Supervisors

Those higher up in the educational power structure can exert an important influence on the use of groups. Most respondents said that in their situation higher-ups encourage groups. One Malaysian stated that inspectors and administrators look for group work when they come to observe classes. Teachers know that group work is a must if they want to obtain a favourable report. A Filipino interviewee mentioned that his principal urges teachers to use groups to make up for the school's shortage of supplies, such as science

lab equipment and social studies reference materials.

Syllabi and Teaching Materials

Respondents noted a trend in favour of groups in syllabi for language instruction, with more syllabi, e.g., that of Singapore, advocating a communicative, rather than a structural, approach to language teaching with less teacher talk and more student participation, including via group activities. In some cases, groupwork is now included in teaching materials and accompanying teachers' guides. Some respondents noted, however, that pressure to complete an entire syllabus, to finish the textbook, goes against the use of groups, because more material can be covered, although perhaps not learned, via a teacher-fronted mode.

Cultural Norms

Respondents generally felt that groups fit their students' cultural norms. The key reason for this is their view that, related to Hofstede's third intercultural dimension, cooperation is valued in students' cultures. For example, Indonesian participants reported that working together is a key concept in their country's culture. In the Philippines, a similar concept goes by the names "pakikisama" (cooperation) and "bayanihan spirit" (helping each other). In Malaysia, group projects are one method that the government recommends for integrating values education across the curriculum (Malaysia Ministry of Education, 1989). This may relate to the fact that for item 13 of the questionnaire which asked if teachers should focus on students' social as well as academic

development (Rich, 1990), everyone who responded answered in the affirmative.

Above, it was postulated that the high power distance and high uncertainty avoidance normally ascribed to Asian cultures, Hofstede's first and second dimensions, might make group activities less appropriate. However, interviewees suggested some alternative perspectives on this. When group activities are endorsed by the teacher, working in groups is following the orders of the more powerful member of the school hierarchy. Additionally, uncertainty is lessened if teachers circulate among groups, instead of sitting behind their desks, while students are working together. In this way, the teacher is still there helping students learn, but as "guide on the side" rather than "sage on the stage."

CONCLUSIONS

In this study, a fairly small sample of educators from various Southeast Asian countries were asked their opinions of the appropriacy of group activities for their second language students. These educators felt, overwhelming, that group activities were appropriate. Indeed, all but one reported that they were using groups with their students. Also relevant to add here is that in Lao PDR, a Southeast Asian country not included in this study, Rodgers (1993) found that of five curriculum innovations presented to a group of 70 Lao teacher trainers, group learning was rated the most likely to work well. Rodgers attributed this mainly to the Lao's cultural affinity toward groups. Nevertheless, it may bear restating

that this study and Rodgers' investigated only educators' perceptions and not actual classroom learning.

Given the results of this study, perhaps the key question is not whether group activities should be used in second language instruction in Southeast Asia - it appears that they already are widely used - but how groups can most effectively contribute to learning. On this issue, insights from the related literatures on cooperative learning and task-based language teaching will be valuable. At the same time, any methodology needs to be adapted to the particular environment in which it is to be used. With this in mind, second language educators working in Southeast Asia will need to give due consideration to how group activities can be tailored to best suit the varied situations in which they teach. Classroom-based research will be a vital part of this consideration process.

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